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ABSTRACT

Findings are presented of a study of some of the characteristics of nontraditional students in an undergraduate social work program, as compared to the characteristics of traditional students. Curriculum and service changes that social work programs can implement to accommodate some of the special needs of nontraditional students are also discussed. All female junior and senior social work students (N=42) at a state university were administered a questionnaire that included questions relating to demographics, possible problem areas, and service changes. The sample included 17 nontraditional students and 25 traditional students. Results included the following: (1) ethnically the groups were comparable, but the nontraditional students were more likely to be divorced or married and have children; (2) the nontraditional students experienced more difficulties with child care and social isolation; and (3) the majority in both groups had problems with financial aid, scheduling, personal finances, and handling employee/student roles. Data are provided in three tables. These results are compared to those of other studies of nontraditional students and found to be similar. Recommendations that social work programs could implement in order to address the needs of returning students in the areas of curriculum and teaching, advisement, class scheduling, extracurricular activities, and credit for life and work experience are discussed. (KM)

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The Needs of the Nontraditional Bachelor of Social Work Student

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The Needs of the Nontraditional
Bachelor of Social Work Student

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of older nontraditional students on campuses nationwide. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education predicts a 23 percent decline in the traditional college bound group of 18-24 year olds by 1997, and that by the year 2,000, 50 percent of students will be aged 22 and older. Many of these students are entering social work programs. That nontraditional students have particular needs and problems has been the conclusion of several studies. (Kuh & Sturgis, 1980; Lance, Lourie and Mayo, 1979; Riehter-Antion, 1986. Based on these and other findings, specialized services and programs have been developing at a rapid rate. (DiBona & Golter, 1982; McGraw 1982; Surdam & Glass, 1982; Swift, Miles & Colvin, 1986).

Social work educators have begun to address this changing student population, and have been recommending modifications to the social work curriculum (Verdiani & Souza, 1987). Nevertheless, no research to date has examined if and how the needs of social work nontraditional students specifically differ from traditional social work students, in order to give more precise direction to the development of programs and services.

This paper presents the findings of an exploratory research study that investigated some of the characteristics of nontraditional students in an undergraduate social work program and compared these characteristics with those of the traditional students. This paper will also discuss some curriculum and service changes that can be implemented by social work programs in order to accommodate some of the special needs of nontraditional social work students as identified in this study.

RESEARCH STUDY

Method

All junior and senior social work students (N = 42) enrolled in an undergraduate social work program at a state university were administered a questionnaire that included questions relating to demographics, possible problem areas, and service changes. The response rate was 100%. In this sample were 17 nontraditional students and 25 traditional age students. Only women were administered the questionnaire. They comprised the majority of the students, and based on previous research, it appears their needs and problems differ somewhat from the men nontraditional students' (Beckman-Smallwood, 1980; Huston-Hoburg & Strange, 1986).

Results

Not surprisingly, demographically the two student

groups were different on some dimensions (See Table 1). The nontraditional students were more likely to be either divorced or married and to have children. Ethnically, the two groups were comparable. The groups were also similar in their reasons for coming to college, most stating that it was to "get a degree."

Greater proportions of the older students identified problems (See Table 2). Some of these problems were related to the demographic difference between the two groups. For example, the nontraditional students were more likely to experience difficulties in handling their roles of parent, spouse, and student. For those with young children under the age of six, child care appeared to be a serious problem. A greater proportion of the nontraditional students than the traditional students indicated they experienced social isolation, had problems with class scheduling, math classes, finding a quiet place to study, individual attention from instructors, and experienced more guilt over being in school. The only areas in which the younger students experienced significantly greater problems than the older students was in dealing with financial aid issues and in advising. The majority in both groups had problems with financial aid, scheduling classes, personal finances, and juggling employee/student roles.

In the area of service need, greater proportions of nontraditional students expressed a need for services (See Table 3). The older students requested a greater number of

Table 1

Demographic Differences Between Traditional & Nontraditional Students

	(N = 25) Traditional		(N = 17) Nontraditional	
	N	%	N	%
Marital Status				
Married	3	12.0	7	41.2
Single	21	84.0	3	17.6
Divorced	0	0	6	35.3
Living together	1	1.0	1	5.9
Children Living at Home				
Yes	6	24.0	13	76.5
No	19	76.0	4	23.5
Sex				
Female	25	100.0	17	100.0
Male	0	0	0	0
Ethnicity				
Anglo	8	32.0	8	47.0
Hispanic	12	48.0	8	47.1
Native American	2	8.0	0	0
Other	3	12.0	1	5.9

Table 2

Problem Areas

	Traditional			Nontraditional		
Academic	Problem/No Problem		N	Problem/No Problem		N
Class scheduling	52.0	48.0	25	75.0	25.0	17
Math courses	29.2	70.8	23	61.5	38.5	13
English courses	20.8	79.2	24	18.2	81.8	11
Quiet place to study	39.1	60.9	23	57.2	42.8	14
Administrative						
Financial aid	84.0	16.0	25	58.8	41.2	17
Advisement	37.5	62.5	24	26.7	73.3	15
Administrative coordination Personal	45.8	54.2	24	43.7	56.3	16
Personal finances	84.0	16.0	25	82.4	17.6	17
Transportation to school	25.0	75.0	24	31.3	68.7	16
Student/employee role conflict	64.0	36.0	25	60.0	40.0	15
Student/parent role conflict	16.7	83.3	6	69.2	30.8	13
Student/spouse role conflict	66.6	33.3	3	85.7	14.3	7
Individual attention	21.7	78.3	23	52.9	47.1	17
Social isolation	20.8	79.2	24	43.8	56.2	16
Physical health	26.1	73.9	23	33.3	66.6	15
Suitable housing	25.0	75.0	24	21.4	78.5	14
General depression	41.7	58.3	24	40.0	60.0	15
Guilt over being in school	21.7	78.3	23	38.5	61.5	13
Feelings of inadequacy	26.1	73.9	23	30.8	69.2	13
Child care problems	100.0	0.0	6	100.0	0.0	9

Note: The N for each problem area varies due to missing values and adjustments according to the nature of the problem. For example, the frequency of "Student-spouse conflict" was recorded only for married students.

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Table 3
Service Needs

An increase in:	Traditional Helpful	Traditional Not helpful	Traditional N	Nontraditional Helpful	Nontraditional Not helpful	Nontraditional N
Financial aid	91.7	8.3	24	100.0	0	17
Evening classes	45.5	54.5	22	90.6	9.4	17
Day classes	52.2	47.8	23	71.4	28.6	14
Weekend classes	36.4	63.6	22	53.3	46.7	15
Academic help from instructors	91.7	8.3	24	98.2	1.8	17
Personal involvement of instructors	95.8	4.2	24	81.2	18.8	16
Flexibility in scheduling classes	95.8	4.2	24	94.1	5.9	17
Access to counseling	87.5	12.5	24	97.5	2.5	16
Opportunity to socialize with other students	79.2	20.8	24	93.3	6.7	15
Help in selecting a major	83.3	16.7	24	91.2	8.8	16
Help with placement after graduation	91.7	8.3	24	100.0	0	16
Flexible application/ admission procedures	78.3	21.7	23	96.5	3.5	17
Family housing on campus	58.3	41.7	24	91.2	8.3	16
Ease of transferring credit	78.3	21.7	23	91.2	8.8	16
Central parking	79.2	20.8	24	87.5	12.5	16
Quiet place to study	91.7	8.3	24	86.7	13.3	15
Lockers on campus	63.6	36.4	22	98.6	1.4	14
Credit for material learned outside the classroom (experiential)	86.4	13.6	22	84.1	15.9	17
Availability of stipends and grants	91.7	8.3	24	100.0	0	17
Book exchange - greater availability of used books	100.0	0	23	100.0	0	17
Child care needs	100.0	0	6	100.0	0	9

Note: The N for each service need varies due to missing values and adjustments according to the nature of the need. For example, "child care needs" was noted only for those with children under 6 years of age.

evening, day and weekend classes (i.e. greater flexibility in scheduling their classes), more opportunities to socialize with other students, more family housing, more flexible admission procedures, greater ease in transferring credit from other institutions, more help with selecting a major, more lockers on campus, and the need for credit to be awarded for experience gained outside of the classroom.

The traditional students also expressed needs in these areas, but in only one service categories did they express greater needs than the nontraditional students - more personal involvement from instructors. Apart from requesting more evening and weekend classes (a minority of the younger students), the majority of students in both groups requested services in all categories.

Discussion

It appears that the nontraditional social work students in the program studied have some very different problems from their younger counterparts. Clearly, these are only exploratory findings, and the sample is small and selected from only one program, consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to other social work nontraditional students. Nevertheless, in examining other studies, it is apparent that the social work nontraditional students in this program are experiencing very similar needs and problems to other nontraditional students. Beckman-Smallwood (1980) in her study of nontraditional women students, found that this

group had substantial needs for child care assistance, help with social/interpersonal relations, greater financial/legal aid, and with job/career guidance. Lance, Lourie & Mayo (1979), in surveying the needs of reentry students, documented the need for a reentry admissions counselor, a specific social area for nontraditional students, and amongst the women, a need for day care.

The findings relating to these nontraditional social work students are also very similar to the findings of a study completed of all nontraditional students completed at the same university. This study (Marlow, 1987) was based on a random sample of 256 nontraditional freshmen and junior students throughout the university. The nontraditional students expressed similar problems to the social work nontraditional students including the handling of their multiple roles, class scheduling, math classes, administrative coordination problems and social isolation. Their service needs were also similar - requesting a greater flexibility in the scheduling of classes, more flexible admission and transfer credit policies, and the need for credit to be awarded for experience gained outside the classroom. Those with young children expressed a need for child care services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BSW PROGRAMS

In considering the results from this study, reviewing of the literature, and discussing this issue with other program directors around the country, it becomes apparent that BSW programs, as well as universities at large, can do more to address the needs of returning students. Students' needs include curriculum and teaching issues, advisement, class scheduling, extra curricular activities, and credit for life and work experience. Each of these areas will be discussed in turn, and specific program recommendations will be made.

Curriculum and teaching

Traditional lecture classes may prove to be unsatisfactory for returning students and fail to utilize their life experience in the class. In discussing the teaching of critical thinking, Meyers (1986) discusses a number of techniques that can be adopted in the classroom that have been demonstrated to be effective with returning and older students. He suggests asking students to incorporate their experiences into the course content through small group process. For example, in introductory social work classes, students can be placed into small groups of three or four students and then asked to make out a family budget and compare that to current poverty lines standards. In this way, students are able to incorporate

their own life experience, values and knowledge with the reality of poverty.

Additional suggestions include asking students to share life experiences with the class, to again bring an air of the real world into the academic setting. Of course, the sharing of life experiences is voluntary, and the instructor must take care not to force the student to share life experiences. Many returning students decided on the field of social work based upon their life experiences, and welcome opportunities to share and reflect. This can be particularly helpful when the life experiences involve cross-cultural and gender issues.

The use of students for class presentations is another teaching method that enables the returning student to utilize their work and life experience and share it in a meaningful way with their classmates. If they are employed in a social service agency or a voluntary agency, this presentation helps them to reflect upon their experience and distill from it the important principles. This process places worth on their ideas by asking them to make the presentation to class. These techniques of group process, classroom discussion and class presentations require a secure instructor who is comfortable in taking class time for what may be a somewhat unstructured presentation. In addition, the instructor should keep in mind that it is not what is presented that is critical, but rather what the student actually learns.

Advisement

Also important to the returning student is an understanding by the faculty of their social and family problems that may be creating constraints in meeting assignments, etc. Being able to discuss these issues with returning students is often more necessary than for traditional students. Individualized advisement and reassurance is very important for returning students as illustrated by this study. Due to the sense of guilt sometimes displayed by the returning students, counseling might also be necessary. The necessity and importance of individualized counseling must be stressed by the program director to the faculty, as it is usually not seen as an important function in most universities. One form of recognition is, if possible, that this service to students be included in faculty evaluations.

Class scheduling

Another problem experienced by the nontraditional student, highlighted by the study, was class scheduling; an area that falls within the purview of most program directors. One solution is weekend courses on Saturdays or Sundays that primarily target returning students. An additional approach is the use of morning sections for parents with children in grade school, so that they may complete their class schedule in the morning, leaving the afternoon free for child care.

Extra curricular activities

Because many returning students lack self assurance or strong ego as they return to school, it is important, in addition to individualized advisement, to help facilitate a networking system for returning students as a means of mutual aid. One approach is through a returning students organization with faculty time assigned to help facilitate the organization and to initiate networking. Depending upon the makeup of the student body, the student social work organization might also prove to be an effective vehicle for returning students.

Life and work experience credit

Finally, an area that has received much attention and is seen as a need by returning students, is recognition and academic credit for work and life experience. While the Council on Social Work Education strictly prohibits this, many other accrediting agencies have worked out detailed processes in order to provide assessment and credit for prior learning through work or life experience.

One of the leading universities in the application of prior learning is the University of Phoenix in Arizona. Their program utilizes the Kolb model of learning process in assessing students' experiential learning (Kolb & Fry, 1975). In a forty-five page guide, the University of Phoenix requires students to write experiential learning essays following the Kolb model, which discusses the

learning process. Students must address the concrete experience, their observations and reflections on their experience, formulations of abstract concepts and generalizations, and demonstrate how they tested the implications and the concepts in new experiences and situations.

The University of Phoenix offers twelve social work courses that have been evaluated using the experiential essays. While it would be difficult to evaluate academic courses in social work, the experiential learning essay could be considered, particularly for partial credit for field practicums where the program greatly exceeds the minimum Council on Social Work Education requirements. As some programs accept testing out, this might be a much more comprehensive and acceptable manner for awarding credit for prior learning.

The guidelines at the University of Phoenix were originally developed in close conformation with the American Council on Education (ACE) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL). CAEL has assisted numerous colleges and universities in developing, implementing and monitoring assessment programs. The University of Phoenix has operated their program for over ten years.

SUMMARY

The suggestions listed above are not intended to be exhaustive, but may point to solutions undergraduate

programs can implement with relative ease and not extensive expense. It is clear from this study and the literature that returning students experience social isolation, have trouble with class scheduling and other usual functions that traditional student do not experience. The faculty, not only in course work, but also outside the class, must be sensitive to the returning students' needs. The program within current constraints must try to address these needs by providing networking systems and better class scheduling. Also, we need to begin to look realistically at providing credit for prior learning.

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